

HOW THE FRENCH CAPTURED FORT NELSON.

By Beckles Willson.

NOTE.—In the May and June numbers Mr. Willson describes the founding of York Factory, the Exploits of Radisson and Groseilliers, and some later events in the life of the former of these two bushrangers. The events here described happened at a later date, but this piece of the history of "The Great Company" shows how intense was the rivalry of the French and the English traders even in those northern regions. These three articles on The Hudson's Bay Co. are advanced chapters from Mr. Willson's forth-coming book.

THE French prisoners captured in the Hudson's Bay Company's expedition of 1696 suffered an incarceration of nearly four months duration at Portsmouth. Hardly had their liberty been regained than they boarded a French brig bound for Havre, and on arrival in Paris, lost little time in making known the condition of affairs at Hudson's Bay. Louis and his Ministers, gazing upon this emaciated band of traders and bushrangers, could hardly refrain from immediate action to retrieve the situation. Precisely following the tactics of their enemy in the previous year, they engaged four men-of-war; which fleet was despatched to join Iberville, then at the port of Placentia, in Newfoundland. The Court was well aware that there was no one man so thoroughly equipped at all points in knowledge of the bay, and the conditions there of life and warfare, as this hero. Consequently, although numerous enough, all other offers to lead the expedition were rejected.

On the arrival of the French ships at Placentia, Iberville took command, embarking in the *Pelican*, of fifty guns. The others were the *Palmier*, the *Weesph*, the *Profond*, and the *Violent*.

But Fort Nelson was not to be captured without a struggle.

At almost the very moment the French fleet sailed, there departed from Plymouth four of the Company's ships, the *Hampshire*, the *Hudson's Bay*, the *Dering*, and *Owner's Love*, a fire-ship, the two former having been participants in the conquest of the previous year. The Company's

fleet entered the straits only forty hours before the ships of the French; and like them was much impeded by the ice, which was unusually troublesome. Passage was made by the enemy in the English wake. The *Profond*, commanded by Duque, pushed past the currents, taking a northerly course, which brought her commander into full view of two of the Company's ships. Shots were exchanged, but owing to the difficulties engendered by the ice, it was impossible to manœuvre with such certainty as to cut off the Frenchman's escape. While this skirmish was in progress, Iberville in the *Pelican* succeeded in getting past the English unknown to them, and reached the mouth of the Nelson River in sight of the fort. His presence, as may be imagined, greatly surprised and disturbed the Governor and the Company's servants; for they had believed their own ships would have arrived in season to prevent the enemy from entering the straits. Several rounds of shot were fired as a signal, in the hope that a response would be made by the Company's ships, which they expected hourly in that quarter.

In his turn the French commander was equally disturbed by the non-arrival of his three consorts, which the exigencies of the voyage had obliged him to abandon. Two days passed in a state of suspense. At daybreak on the fifth of September three ships* were distinctly visible; both parties

*The fourth, the fire-ship *Owner's Love*, was never more heard of. It is supposed that, separated from the others, she ran into the ice and was sunk, with all on board.

joyfully believed they were their own. So certain was Iberville, that he immediately raised anchor and started to join the new-comers. He was soon undeceived, but the perception of his mistake in no way daunted him.

The Company's commanders were not prepared either for the daring or the fury of the Frenchman's onslaught. It is true the *Pelican* was much superior to any of their own craft singly, being manned by nearly two hundred and fifty men, and boasting forty-four pieces of cannon. The Company's ships lined up, the *Hampshire* in front, the *Dering* next, with the *Hudson's Bay* bringing up the rear.

The combatants being now in close proximity, the battle began at half-past nine in the morning. The French commander came straight for the *Hampshire*, whose captain, believing it was his design to board, instantly lowered his mainsheet and put up his fore-top-sail. Contact having been by these means narrowly evaded, the battle suddenly shifted between the *Pelican* and the *Dering*, whose mainsail was smitten with a terrific volley. At the same time the *Hudson's Bay*, veering, received a damaging broadside. The Company's men could distinctly hear the orders shouted by d'Iberville to both ships to discharge a musket fire into the *Dering's* fore-castle, but in this he was anticipated by the English sailors, who poured a storm of bullets in upon the Frenchman, accompanied by a broadside of grape, which wrought havoc with the sails. While the cries of the wounded on the *Pelican* could be distinctly heard, all three of the Company's ships opened fire, with the design of disabling her rigging. But one of them, the *Hudson's Bay*, seeing that it could not engage the *Pelican*, owing to Iberville's tactics, determined to run in front of her and give her the benefit of a constant hull fire, besides taking the wind from her sails. Iberville observed the movement; the two English vessels were near, he veered around, and, by a superb piece of seamanship, came so near to the *Hamp-*

shire that the crew of the latter saw that boarding was intended. Every man flew out on the main deck, with his pistol and cutlass, and a terrific broadside of grape on the part of the Englishman alone saved him.

The battle raged hotter and fiercer. The *Hampshire's* salvation had been only temporary; at the end of three hours and a half she began to sink, with all sails set. When this occurred, Iberville had ninety men wounded, forty being struck by a single broadside. Notwithstanding this, he decided at once to push matters with the *Hampshire's* companions, although the *Pelican* was in a badly damaged state, especially the fore-castle, which was a mass of splinters.

The enemy made at once for the *Dering*, which, besides being the smallest ship, had suffered severely. She crowded on all sail and avoided an encounter, and Iberville being in no condition to prosecute the chase, soon returned to the *Hudson's Bay*, which surrendered. Iberville was not destined, however, to reap much advantage from his prize, the *Hampshire*. The English flag-ship was unable to render any assistance to the sinking *Hampshire*, which soon went down with nearly all on board.*

To render the situation more distressing, no sooner had some ninety prisoners been made, than a storm arose; so that it became out of the question to approach the shore with design of landing. They were without a long-boat and each attempt to launch canoes in the boiling surf was attended with failure.

Night fell; the wind instead of calming, grew fiercer. The sea became truly terrible, seeking, seemingly, with all its power to drive the *Pelican* and the *Hudson's Bay* upon the coast. The rudders of each ship broke; the

*Thus was concluded what was, in the opinion of the best authorities, French and English, one of the fiercest and bloodiest battles of the war.

"Toute la Marine de Rochefort croient que ce combat a été un des plus rudes de cette Guerre," says La Potherie.

tide rose and there seemed no hope for the crews whose destiny was so cruel. Their only hope in the midst of the bitter blast and clouds of snow which environed them, lay in the strength of their cables. Soon after nine o'clock the *Hudson's Bay* and its anchor parted with a shock.

"Instantly," says one of the survivors, "a piercing cry went up from our forecabin. The wounded and dead lay heaped up, with so little separation one from the other that silence and moans alone distinguished them. All were icy cold, and covered with blood. They had told us the anchor would hold; and we dreaded being washed up on the shore stiff the next morning."

A huge wave broke over the main deck and the ship rocked desperately. Two hours later the keel was heard to split, and the ship was hurled rudderless to and fro in the trough of the sea.

By the French account, matters were in no more enviable state aboard the *Pelican*; Iberville, however, amidst scenes rivalling those just described, did his best to animate his officers and men with a spirit equalling his own.

"It is better," he cried, "to die, if we must, outside the bastions of Fort Bourbon than to perish here like pent sheep on board."

When morning broke, it was seen by the French that their ship was not yet submerged, and it was resolved to disembark by such means as lay in their power. The Company's servants were more fortunate. The *Hudson's Bay* had drifted eight miles to the south of the fort, and was wrecked on a bank of icy marshland, which at least constrained them to wade no deeper than their knees. The French, however, were forced to make their way through the icy water submerged to their necks, from the results of which terrible exposure no fewer than eighteen marines and seamen lost their lives. Once on shore they could not, like the English, look forward to a place of refuge and appease their hunger with provisions and drink. They were obliged, in their shivering, half frozen state, to subsist upon moss and seaweed, but for which

indifferent nourishment they must inevitably have perished.

The Company's garrison witnessed the calamities which were overtaking the French, but not knowing how great their number, and assured of their hostility, did not attempt any acts of mercy. They perceived the enemy camped in a wood, less than two leagues distant, where, building several large fires, they sought to restore their spirits by means of warmth and hot draughts of boiled herbs.

While the fort was being continually recruited by survivors of the two wrecked ships, the other three French vessels had arrived on the scene. The fourth, the *Violent*, lay at the bottom of the bay, having been sunk by the ice. The *Palmier* had suffered the loss of her helm, but was fortunate in not being also a victim of the storm. The French forces being now united, little time was lost by Iberville in making active preparations for the attack upon the fort.

On the 11th, the enemy attained a small wood, almost under the guns of the fort, and having entrenched themselves, lit numerous fires and made considerable noise in order to lend the impression to the English that an entrenchment was being thrown up. This ruse was successful, for the Governor gave orders to fire in that direction. Iberville seized this opportunity to effect a landing of all his men and armaments from the ships.

The fort would now soon be hemmed in on all sides, and it were indeed strange if a chance shot or firebrand did not ignite the timbers, and the powder magazine were not exploded. Governor Bailey was holding a council of his advisers when one of the French prisoners in the fort gave notice of the approach of a messenger bearing a flag of truce. He was recognized as Martigny. The Governor permitted his advance, and sent a factor to meet him and insist upon his eyes being bandaged before he would be permitted to enter. Martigny was conducted to where the council was sitting and there delivered Iberville's message, demanding surrender. He was instantly

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interrupted by Captain Smithsend,
who, with a great show of passion,
asked the emissary if it were not true
that Iberville had been killed in the
action. In spite of Martigny's denials,
Smithsend loudly persisted in believing
in Iberville's death; that the French
were in sore straits, and only made
the present attack because no other
alternative was offered to desperate
men to obtain food and shelter. Bailey
allowed himself to be influenced by
Smithsend, and declined to yield to any
of Martigny's demands. The latter
returned, and the French instantly set
up a battery near the fort, and con-
tinued, amidst a hail of bullets, the
work of landing their damaged stores
and armaments. Stragglers from the
wreck of the *Hudson's Bay* continued all
day to find their way to the fort, but
several reached it only to be shot down
in mistake by the cannon and muskets
of their own men. On the 12th, after
a hot skirmish, fatal to both sides, the
Governor was again requested, this
time by Sérigny, to yield up the fort
to superior numbers.

"If you refuse we will set fire to the
place, and accord you no quarter."

"Set fire and be d—d to you!"
responded Bailey.

He then set to work, with Smith-
send, whose treatment at the hands of
the French in the affair of the *Merchant
of Perpetuana* was still vividly before
him, to animate the garrison.

"Go for them, you dogs!" cried
Bailey. "Give it to them hot and
heavy; I promise you forty pounds
apiece for your widows!"

Fighting in those days was attended
by fearful mortality, and the paucity of
pensions to the hero's family, perhaps
made the offer seem handsome. At
any rate it seemed a sufficient incen-
tive to the Company's men, who fought
like demons.*

A continual fire of guns and mortars
as well as of muskets was kept up.
The Canadians sallied out upon a num-
ber of skirmishes, filling the air with a

* "Ils avoient de tres habile canoniers,"
Jérémie, an eye-witness, was forced to con-
fess.

frightful din, borrowing from the Iro-
quois their piercing war-cries. In one
of these sallies St. Martin, one of their
bravest men, perished.

Under protection of a flag of truce,
Sérigny came again to demand a sur-
render. It was the last time, he said,
the request would be preferred. A
general assault had been resolved upon
by the enemy, who were at their last
resort, living like beasts in the wood,
feeding on moss, and to whom no ex-
tremity could be odious were it but an
exchange for their present condition.
They were resolved upon carrying the
fort, even at the point of the bayonet
and over heaps of their slain.

Bailey now decided to yield. He
sent Morrison to carry the terms of
capitulation, in which he demanded all
the peltries in the fort belonging to the
Hudson's Bay Company. This demand
being rejected by the enemy, Bailey
later in the evening sent Henry Kelsey
with a proposition to retain a portion
of their armament; this also was re-
fused. There was now nothing for
it but to surrender, Iberville having
granted an evacuation with bag and
baggage.

At one o'clock on the following day,
therefore, the evacuation took place.
Bailey, at the head of his garrison and
a number of the crew of the wrecked
Hudson's Bay and six survivors of the
Hampshire, marched forth from Fort
York with drums beating, flag flying,
and with arms and baggage. They
hardly knew whither they were to go,
or what fate awaited them. A vast and
inhospitable region greeted their eyes,
and a winter long to be remembered
had begun. But to the French it
seemed as if their spirits were undaun-
ted, and they set forth bravely.

The enemy watched the retreat of
the defeated garrison not without ad-
miration, and for the moment specula-
tion was rife as to their fate. But it
was only for the moment. Too rejoiced
to contemplate anything but the ter-
mination of their own sufferings, the
Canadians hastened to enter the fort,
headed by Boisbriant, late an ensign in
the service of the *Compagnie du Nord*.

The *fleur de lis* was flung to the air ;
 shouts for King Louis drowned the
 drum-beats of the vanquished ; Fort
 Nelson was once more in the hands
 of the French.

NOTE.—The Company was debarred from
 any attempt at reconquest, because of the
 treaty just concluded at Ryswick, which
 yielded the territory which had been the scene
 of so much commerce, action and bloodshed
 to the subjects of the Most Christian King.



THE CRY OF THE OUTLANDER.

(Dedicated to our Brothers in South Africa.)

GOD wrote on the face of the Briton,
 " True to my brother I stand " ;
 But the men who sit in council
 Hide the sign with the silver hand.

And the brother that's yoked with the oxen
 Calls Briton to Briton in vain ;
 For the men who sit in council
 Must reek of the worldly gain.

Fight first, is the law of the Briton,
 Then ask for the help you need :
 But the men who sit in council
 Of the blood take little heed.

Ye have fought in the outlands, brothers ;
 Ye have bled, not wise but well ;
 Shall the men who sit in council
 Keep ye in a living hell ?

The cry of the outlawed brother
 Thunders across the sea ;
 And the men who sit in council
 Must act, or cease to be.

W. A. Fraser.

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